

Three years have passed since the collapse of the Tower of Pisa, but only now can I accept the crucial role that I played in the destruction of this unique landmark. Over twenty tourists died as the thousands of tons of marble lost their grasp on the air and collapsed to the ground. Among them was my wife Elaine, who had climbed to the topmost tier and was looking down at me when the first visible crack appeared in the tower's base. Never were tragedy and triumph so intimately joined, as if Elaine's pride in braving the worn and slippery stairs had been punished by the unseen forces that had sustained this unbalanced mass of masonry for so many centuries.

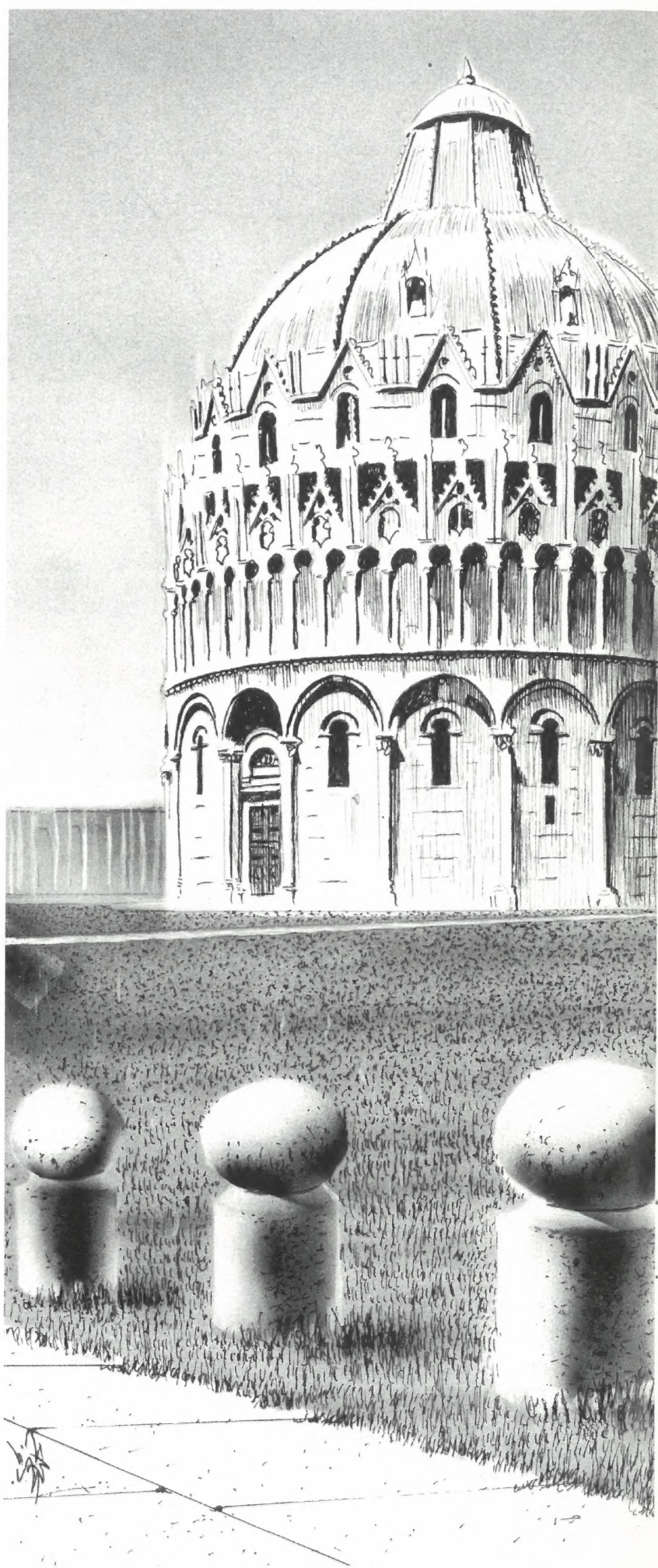
I realize now that another element – farce – was present on that day. By chance a passing tourist on the steps of the cathedral had taken a photograph of the tower as the crack reached the third floor and a tell-tale section of cornice began its fall to earth. The photograph, endlessly published throughout the world, clearly shows the four startled tourists on the uppermost deck. Three of them are leaning back on their heels, hands raised to grip the sky, aware that the ancient campanile has moved under their feet.

Elaine, alone, has already seized the rail, and is staring at the grass waiting for her nearly two hundred feet below. Using a magnifying glass, one can see that, true to her quirky and mocking character, she shows almost no alarm. Her eyes have noticed the falling cornice, and I like to think that she is already planning to sue the municipality of Pisa for neglecting the safety of its tourists, and is collecting evidence that in due course she will present to her lawyers.

The dozen or so tourists visible on the lower floors are still making their way around its canted decks, groping past the narrow columns as they climb the 300 steps to the roof. A father and his young daughter wave to the tourists below them, two Italian sailors in uniform play the fool for their girl-friends, feigning an attack of giddiness, and an elderly couple pause to rest after climbing to the first floor, determined to complete the ascent. None of them sees the falling cornice and the fine cascade of powdered mortar.

The only figure on the ground who is aware of the imminent catastrophe is a man in a white jacket and panama hat who stands at the foot of the tower, both hands raised to the marble flank. His face is hidden, but his arms are braced against the shifting stone, his back arched above his straining legs. We can see that in his desperate way he is trying to hold upright the collapsing tower that is about to obliterate him.

Or so everyone assumes. The newspaper caption writers, the commentators on TV documentaries, all commend the bravery of this solitary figure. Surprisingly, he has never been identified, and neither his hat nor his white jacket were found in the mountain of rubble that was



tion except where otherwise stated).

Perceived reality: the image we have of the Mafia from all those black & white films we saw when we were kids. Classic B-movieland. Films that were so bad they were almost good.

The film of *Johnny Mnemonic* is so bad that it's almost good. I'm still not sure how seriously we're meant to take it, or whether it was intended to be an over-the-top spoof. Most of the acting is as wooden as an old chairleg; much of the dialogue is straight out of those B movies. The film shouts *Cliché!*

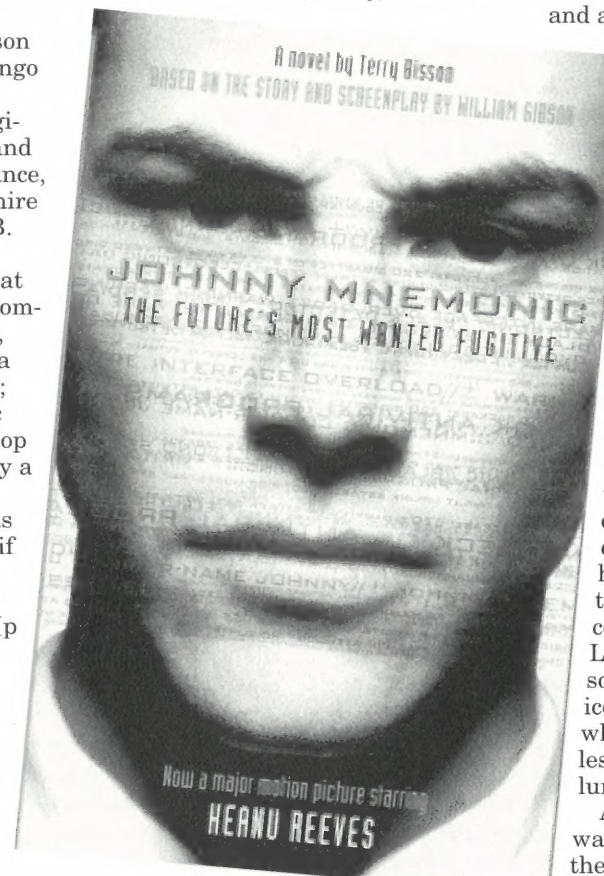
Problem is, a lot of that cliché is in Bisson's book as well. One could understand lines like "It's a long shot but it's better than no shot – so let's get moving!" or "What fresh hell is this?" (pp 102, 168) being in the film for a quick laugh, but they're not actually in Gibson's script; they only have the effect of making the novel look like hack work, and Bisson ought to be better than that, surely. Unless it's a deliberate B novel.

The story's much the same in the script, the novel and the film; Bisson in his novelization, and Robert Longo in his film, have made only a few minor changes. As in Gibson's original short story, to which the film and novelization bear a slight resemblance, Johnny is a courier; corporations hire his brain to carry data from A to B. (As someone who once worked for GCHQ and NSA, I'd've thought that triple-encryption over a shielded com-link would have been more secure, not to mention more efficient and a damn sight faster, but never mind; one mustn't quibble with the basic plot device.) He's been given a dollop of data nicked from Pharmakom by a couple of scientists-with-a-conscience; only trouble is, it's twice as big as his spare brain space, and "if the upload volume exceeds your storage capacity, synaptic seepage will kill you in two or three days" (p 19). His other slight problem is that Pharmakom have hired Yakuza to get the data back; his head will do, in a cryogenic organ transporter.

Fighting to keep his head on his shoulders, Johnny meets up with Jane, a neurally-enhanced fighter who saves his life for 50 grand. Most of the rest of the story is fight and chase, chase and fight, and it really doesn't matter much whether the baddies are using sawn-off shotguns and piano wire or missile launchers and monomolecular filament. Fairly late in the story we all discover what's in Johnny's head: the cure for NAS, Nerve Attenuation Syndrome, a sort of super-twitchy Parkinson's Disease caused by all the electronic crap we're surrounded by – "NAS is about information overload, man! All the electronics around you,

poisoning the airwaves. Technological fucking civilization!" (p 132). (It's not such a fictional idea: real-life electricity authorities are finally having to admit that people who live under power cables get sick.) Pharmakom, being like all drug companies money-grabbing blood-suckers, were going to hang on to the cure; the scientists-with-a-conscience had wanted it released (they end up dead, of course).

Fight and chase, chase and fight, and a lot more of the same, right up to the fairly predictable end. A bit too much of it, really, and some



of it in the film just a tad too nasty. The fact that there are 45 stuntmen and women to only 36 characters (and half the latter are tiny bit-roles) says something. It says this is an action film, with only the odd half-second here and there for introspection. The book doesn't have much more.

The one beauty of the film – and here it's so good it's brilliant – is that we can be shown what Johnny sees when he goes into cyberspace. (Bisson does his best, but it's inevitably diffi-

cult to convey such a visual concept in words.) The special effects really are something special – but don't go to see this film if you're in the slightest epileptic; I hope cinemas publish a warning to that effect.

One other scene stays in the mind: the station concourse filled with NAS patients and volunteer doctors and nurses – it's like *M*A*S*H* times fifty. It's the one bit of humanity in the film. It works.

Johnny has another problem: to make space for all the data, his own longterm memories have been displaced. He has no memories, beyond the occasional flash, of his childhood, his upbringing. It's this background memory, of course, that makes us into the interesting adults we all are – and Johnny ain't got it.

Johnny's personality problem (*viz.* a complete lack thereof) is accentuated in the film. In the book, as early as page 79, Bisson gives us: "Jane was bent over with her back to him, and as he approached her it dawned on him, for the first time, that the black-clad female fighting machine that had rescued him was – a pretty girl. Almost pretty, anyway. Nice butt in tight jeans..." In the film, he doesn't seem to notice her butt or anything else until shortly before the end – though she clearly has the hots for him from fairly early on.

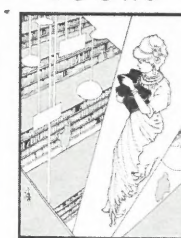
This is one of the unbelievable abilities about the whole thing: the extent to which total strangers, living in a hard, vicious world, go out of their way to help this nerd. Okay, once they realize that his head contains the cure to NAS, they have a real reason, but before that, were the gorgeous Jane, the cool doctor Spider, and the hip LoTek gang-leader J-Bone really so flowing with altruism for this ice-cold, emotionless jerk who, for whatever good plot reasons, shows less vivacity than the average lump of concrete?

Also somewhat unrealistic is the way the good guys fight almost to the death with the villains, then in the next frame pick themselves up from the floor with neat and tidy hair, and no sign of the scrap except for an artistically-placed trickle of blood on a cheek. In the final fight sequence, just after Jane has unnailed herself from a cross, the script has the stage direction: "Jane climbing support to broken scanner. An amazing feat, considering her condition" (*Script*, p 114).

Yup. Gibson knew he was writing a hack B movie.

David V. Barrett

BOOKS



REVIEWED